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WORLD CONFERENCE ON HUMAN RIGHTS

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Human Rights

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"The achievement of basic human rights has become one of the central challenges of civilization. There is new hope for the cause of human rights. But there are new and dangerous challenges as well."

Secretary-General
Boutros Boutros-Ghali

FINAL NEGOTIATIONS IN GENEVA SET STAGE FOR 1993 WORLD CONFERENCE ON HUMAN RIGHT

PrepCom Adopts Draft Final Document for Vienna Conference

GENEVA – The United Nations has concluded three weeks of intense negotiations aimed at strengthening human rights globally, paving the way for the World Conference on Human Rights to forge a new global human rights agenda in Vienna, Austria on 14-25 June. The discussions here represented the last step before final deliberations begin in Vienna, where some 180 United Nations Member States are to hold the first global human rights conference in 25 years.

Although a number of items remain unresolved, a draft final document for consideration by the World Conference was adopted "ad referendum" (meaning it can be changed and amended) by 154 Member States at the fourth and final Preparatory Committee meeting which concluded here on 8 May. The document sets out a series of universal human rights issues and proposes an agenda for action which would revolutionize human rights work in the coming years, and into the next century.

Senior Government officials will hold informal consultations in Vienna on 9-11 June in an effort to bridge their differences prior to sending the document to the World Conference. The World Conference, with some 5,000 delegates from Member States and hundreds of nongovernmental organizations meeting at the Austria Centre in Vienna, will represent the culmination nearly two years of preparations mandated by the United Nations General Assembly.

"Even though some disagreements still exist, the importance of this meeting in Geneva was that from many documents submitted at its outset, one unique human rights draft document has emerged," said Mr Ibrahima Fall, Assistant-Secretary-General for Human Rights, and Secretary-General of the World Conference. "We have had a positive consensus on key issues such as protection from torture, and the protection of women, the disabled, minorities and the world's indigenous peoples. That is one of the successes of this meeting."

The World Conference comes amid an alarming increase in human rights violations worldwide (See "Facts & Figures", below). This year, the Centre for Human Rights has already received more than 125,000 complaints about violations, nearly triple the complaints received for all of 1992. Similarly, the pace of reported "disappearances" is running well ahead of 1991 and 1992. The dramatically increasing caseload has taxed the resources of the Centre, which has an annual budget of approximately $11 million.

Issues and Proposals

The draft document adopted in Geneva is based on three regional declarations adopted earlier this year by United Nations regional human rights meetings in Tunis, San José and Bangkok, and three preparatory committee meetings hosted by the United Nations in Geneva. It also reflects contributions from governments and intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, and studies prepared by independent experts.

As adopted in Geneva, the draft document is in two parts: the first outlines a wide range of human rights issues of concern to the international community, while the second provides a draft programme of action in the field of human rights for the years ahead. In its first section, the document:

- Reaffirms the universality and indivisibility of human rights but specifies that the "exercise of any human right must not be denied because the full enjoyment of other rights has not been achieved." It further states that "it is the duty of States, regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms."
- Stresses that democracy, development and respect for human rights are interdependent and mutually reinforcing;
- Reaffirms the rights of minorities and states that persons belonging to minorities have the "right to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion and to use their own language in private and in public;"
- Calls for the elimination of gender-based violence and all forms of sexual harassment and exploitation, including those resulting from cultural prejudice.
- Calls for the punishment of perpetrators of such "abhorrent practices" as genocide, 'ethnic cleansing' and systematic rape of women in war situations. Another principle states that States are "duty-bound" to ensure that education is aimed at strengthening respect for human rights.

In its section devoted to a draft programme of action in the field of human rights, the document describes concrete steps States can take to improve the enjoyment of human rights by their citizens. It also defines the role of the United Nations, specialized agencies and other institutions involved in the protection of human rights, and calls for increased cooperation and coordination among them.

The action programme:

- Calls for action to eliminate racism and racial discrimination, xenophobia and other forms of intolerance;
- Urges the international community to promote and protect the rights of persons belonging to minorities;
- Calls for stepped up action against torture;
- Urges Governments and the United Nations to accord priority to the full and equal enjoyment by women of all human rights;
- Calls on the United Nations to encourage the universal ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women by the year 2000;
- Urges Governments, regional and international organizations to facilitate the access of women to decision making posts and their greater participation in the decision making process;
- Encourages further steps within the United Nations Secretariat to appoint and promote women staff members.

A number of issues will remain the subject of intense discussion when the World Conference begins its work in Vienna next month. These include the establishment of the position and office of a High Commissioner for Human Rights, who would have emergency powers similar to that of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees; calls from some Member States for the establishment of an international human rights court; and a significantly increased allocation of existing budgetary, material and personnel resources to United Nations human rights programmes and the Centre for Human Rights.

NEWS ITEMS

Need More Information about the PrepCom or World Conference?

Copies of the draft Final Document are available by contacting the numbers below. For journalists attending the World Conference, a comprehensive media briefing on the issues will be held on Sunday, 13 June, from 1:30 p.m. to 6 p.m., followed by a reception hosted by the Austrian Government at the Austria Centre, Vienna, site of the World Conference. Speakers will include senior Conference officials and key Government delegates. All accredited journalists are invited. For a briefing schedule, contact the United Nations Department of Public Information:

New York	Tel. (212) 963-8070	Fax: (212) 963-4556
Geneva	Tel. (41-22) 917-2336	Fax: (41-22) 917-0073
Vienna	Tel. (43-1) 211-31-5139	Fax: (43-1) 237-241

NGO participation in the 4th PrepCom

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with expertise in human rights and/or development have played an influential role in the negotiations thus far, both at the regional meetings and at the Preparatory meetings. Their participation in the preparatory process has been welcomed by the Secretariat, which sought to forge a genuine partnership with NGOs in the Conference process.

Some 162 nongovernmental organizations participated at the fourth session of the Preparatory Committee, and took an active part in the general debate and the first reading of the draft document in plenary meetings. Although they were not admitted as

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observers during closed door talks here, their suggestions were submitted to the drafting committee preparing the final document for Vienna.

From 10 to 12 June in Vienna, an NGO forum will be held to allow NGOs to present their views and develop strategy for lobbying the Conference. During the two-week Conference, NGOs will also conduct a series of parallel events at the Vienna Centre, including seminars, workshops, concerts and exhibitions. For more information, contact Mrs. Elena Ponomareva, United Nations, Geneva, (41-22) 917-2336.

Eminent Persons to Attend World Conference

Eight eminent persons, all key figures in the world of human rights, are to attend the WCHR at the invitation of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali. They include Mrs. Corazon Aquino, former President of the Philippines, Mrs. Elena Bonner, co-founder of Memorial in the Federation of Russia, Mr. Jimmy Carter, former President of the United States of America, Mrs. Rigoberta Menchu Tum, 1992 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Mr. Nelson Mandela, President of the African National Congress of South Africa, His Royal Highness El Hassan bin Talal of Jordan, Mr. Wole Soyinka, Nobel Prize Laureate of Nigeria and Mrs. Simone Veil, former President of the European Parliament and State Minister in the French Government. All eight have been making public statements, mobilizing forces for the Conference and participating in other events, including prepublicity. They will also play prominent roles at the WCHR in Vienna.

FACTS & FIGURES

The World Conference on Human Rights

- On 18 December 1990, the *General Assembly of the United Nations* decided to convene a World Conference on Human Rights. Governments, United Nations Specialized Agencies and bodies, international and regional organizations and NGOs were invited to participate in the Conference and to assist in the preparatory process.

- There have been four PrepComs in Geneva: 9-13 September 1991; 30 March to 10 April 1992; 14-18 September 1992; 19 April-8 May 1993. These sessions adopted the draft rules of procedure for the World Conference. The General Assembly adopted the provisional agenda for the Conference on 18 December 1992.

- As part of the preparatory process, United Nations Member States were asked by the General Assembly to hold regional meetings to exchange views and highlight their concerns. Representatives of African States met at Tunis from 2 to 6 November 1992 and adopted a declaration now referred to as the "Tunis Declaration". The representatives of Latin American and Caribbean States adopted the "San Jose Declaration" on Human Rights at a regional meeting in San Jose, Costa Rica, from 18 to 22 January 1993. The representatives of Asian States adopted the "Bangkok Declaration" at a regional meeting in Bangkok held from 29 March to 2 April 1993. (Individual reports from each meeting are available in the World Conference press kit).

- In addition to these regional meetings, "satellite meetings" were held in various parts of the world and submitted recommendations and suggestions to the fourth session of the Preparatory Committee.

- The WCHR will be the first since the International Conference on Human Rights in Teheran 25 years ago, and is only the second such conference since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. It comes amid skyrocketing rights problems.

Human Rights in the world today

- The United Nations Centre for Human Rights estimates that at least half of the world's people suffer from some serious violation or deprivation of their basic economic, social, cultural, political and civil rights. These violations range from torture, execution, rape, arbitrary detention, violence and disappearances, to extreme poverty, slavery, child abuse, famine and undernourishment, and lack of access to clean water, sanitation and health care;

- Already this year, the U.N. has received more than 125,000 human rights complaints, up sharply from the 43,000 in all of 1992. Still, this is believed to be only a fraction of the total;

- In the first three months of 1993 alone, the U.N. received reports of 5,000 "disappearances," compared to 17,000 for all of 1992 and 16,000 for all of 1991;

- Famine, poverty, civil war and other violence sent the number of refugees surging to about 17 million in 1992, with another 25 million displaced within their own homelands;

- Between 150 million and 200 million children are employed as illegal child labour in over 50 countries;

- Some 700 million adults are either unemployed or underemployed as global economic woes accelerate;

- Approximately 780 million people are undernourished;

- Nearly 1 billion adults lack adequate education;

- Between 1-1.4 billion people live in absolute poverty, with another 1 billion living on the margins of poverty;

- Some 1.5 billion people lack adequate health services, 1.3 billion safe water, and some 2.3 billion, sanitation;

- Millions face racism, rampant xenophobia, or worsening disease threats, such as tuberculosis, and AIDS.

The United Nations Centre for Human Rights

– The Centre for Human Rights is the focal point for the human rights activities of the United Nations and the primary organizational unit within the Secretariat for the implementation of the human rights programme.

– The Centre was established in 1982. It succeeded the Division of Human Rights, a smaller unit which provided secretariat services for United Nations human rights bodies from 1946 to 1982.

– The Centre is located in the United Nations Office of Geneva. It has an annual budget of approximately US$ 11 million, or less than 1 percent of the total regular budget of the United Nations. The Centre has a total of 135 staff members, including some 70 professional staff.

– The Centre is headed by Mr. Ibrahima Fall of Senegal, the United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights and Secretary-General for the World Conference on Human Rights. His Office provides overall direction, supervision and management to the activities of the human rights programme. It is responsible for making recommendations for action and formulating policy options for the Secretary-General.

– The Office is also responsible for the implementation of human rights policies and programmes established by the various policy-making organs, in particular the Commission on Human Rights. It carries out fact-finding missions and other procedures dealing with alleged human rights violations as well as technical assistance programmes in the field of human rights. The Office is also charged with the coordination of the human rights policies of the United Nations system.

– The Centre for Human Rights is divided into three branches: implementation, legislation, and advisory services and technical assistance.

"The human rights situation today is one of stark contrasts. Many countries have adopted and are implementing international standards set by the United Nations, but in many others the level of human rights violations that continues is distressing. Death, destruction, discrimination, poverty, persecution, rape, slavery, starvation and stunted or blighted lives remain the daily curse of millions of people."

Ibrahima Fall,
Assistant-Secretary-General
for Human Rights
and
Secretary-General
of the World Conference

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